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Bamboo Diplomacy: Vietnam's Strategy of Resilience and Flexibility in a Multipolar World

Giulio Chinappi*

Centro Studi Eurasia-Mediterraneo (CeSE-M) - Italy

chinappi.giulio@gmail.com

Abstract

This article analyses Vietnam's concept of "bamboo diplomacy" as a pragmatic instrument of statecraft in an era of intensifying great-power competition. Through qualitative document analysis of official policy statements, party congress reports, bilateral communiqués and contemporaneous media, together with a small set of comparative case studies, the paper traces how Hanoi operationalises resilience, adaptability and selective alignment to defend sovereign interests and expand diplomatic room for manoeuvre. Examining episodes in Vietnam–China maritime interactions, evolving security and economic ties with the United States, and Hanoi's initiatives within ASEAN, the study identifies three mutually reinforcing pillars of bamboo diplomacy: tactical flexibility to seize strategic openings; principled firmness on core issues such as territorial integrity; and networked multilateralism that leverages diversified partnerships. The evidence indicates that bamboo diplomacy constitutes a calibrated form of soft balancing — avoiding formal military coalitions while deepening partnerships that collectively raise the costs of coercion. The article situates this indigenous diplomatic idiom within contemporary international relations theory and assesses its limits, notably economic dependence on China and constrained defence capacities. It concludes by reflecting on the potential applicability of Vietnam's approach for other middle powers navigating an increasingly multipolar order.

Keywords

Vietnam; bamboo diplomacy; foreign policy; multipolarity; soft balancing; ASEAN; strategic autonomy

Introduction

The vocabulary of foreign policy in Southeast Asia has long reflected a search for strategic room for manoeuvre amid asymmetric pressures. In Vietnam's case, the metaphor of *bamboo diplomacy* has crystallised this search into a coherent doctrine that combines suppleness with rootedness: the bamboo bends in strong winds yet remains anchored by deep, interlaced roots. Formally articulated by General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng at the National Foreign Relations Conference on 14 December 2021, the phrase has since travelled from political rhetoric into analytical discourse, inviting both empirical scrutiny and theoretical positioning within International Relations (IR).¹ At stake is more than a stylistic flourish. The concept as deployed by Hanoi signals a particular way of navigating intensifying rivalry between China and the United States, while sustaining Vietnam's long-standing principles of independence, self-reliance, and cooperative multilateralism.² This evolution has unfolded alongside major diplomatic upgrades, notably the elevation of ties with the United States to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in September 2023—an emblematic move in Vietnam's diversification without alignment.³

Existing scholarship on small- and middle-power strategies in Asia has tended to frame behaviour along a familiar spectrum: balancing, hedging, or alignment politics centred on crisis episodes in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific. Vietnam is often cited as a

¹ Nguyễn Phú Trọng, "Full Speech by Party Leader Nguyen Phu Trong at National Foreign Relations Conference," *VP News, Government Portal*, (31 December 2021), [Full speech by Party leader Nguyen Phu Trong at National Foreign Relations Conference](#)

² Ministry of National Defence, 2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper (Hà Nội: Government of Viet Nam, 2019).

³ "Joint Leaders' Statement: Elevating United States–Vietnam Relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," *The White House*, (11 September 2023), [JOINT LEADERS' STATEMENT: ELEVATING UNITED STATES–VIETNAM RELATIONS TO A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP | The White House](#)

quintessential “hedger,” cultivating security and economic links with multiple partners while avoiding exclusive alignment.⁴ Yet such labels risk flattening the indigenous logics that local policymakers themselves foreground. *Bamboo diplomacy* is one such indigenous idiom, embedding strategic practice in an ethical-political narrative that foregrounds resilience, flexibility, and principle. Reconstructing how this idiom is translated into policy choices can enrich IR theory by grounding concepts like soft balancing and limited alignment in locally articulated frameworks, rather than retrofitting local practice into external typologies.⁵

This article advances two claims. First, *bamboo diplomacy* is not merely a rebranding of hedging; it is an idiom of statecraft that sequences flexibility, firmness, and networked multilateralism in ways that privilege issue-specific calibration over bloc politics. Whereas hedging often reads as simultaneous and sometimes contradictory policy tracks, bamboo diplomacy highlights the criteria by which Vietnamese leaders decide when to bend and when to hold fast—especially on sovereignty in the maritime domain, the sanctity of Party leadership, and the pursuit of development-led legitimacy.⁶ Secondly, the idiom operates performatively: by naming—domestically and regionally—Vietnam’s style of diplomacy, it shapes expectations among partners and publics, thereby expanding diplomatic room for manoeuvre.⁷

⁴ Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “Hedging as a Policy Without Pronouncement: A Tale of Three Defence White Papers,” Chapter, Vol. No. 22, NIDS Joint Research Series (The National Institute for Defense Studies), 5-22, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393416747_Hedging_as_a_Policy_Without_Pronouncement_A_Tale_of_Three_Defence_White_Papers

⁵ T.V. Paiul, Kai He, and Anders Wivel, “Soft Balancing in the Regions: Causes, Characteristics and Consequences.” (2025.), *International Affairs* 101 (1): 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae286>.

⁶ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper*.

⁷ Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, “Vietnamese ‘Bamboo Diplomacy’ Philosophy: The Essence of the Party’s Theory on Foreign Relations in the Renovation Period,” (25 August 2025), [“Vietnamese bamboo diplomacy” philosophy: The essence of the Party’s theory on foreign relations in the renovation period](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393416747_Hedging_as_a_Policy_Without_Pronouncement_A_Tale_of_Three_Defence_White_Papers)

The regional context renders these claims policy-relevant. Great-power rivalry has thickened across military, technological, and geo-economic fronts. China remains Vietnam's largest trading partner and an unavoidable neighbour with whom land borders are largely settled but maritime disputes persist; the United States has become a critical economic and security partner, with ties now at the apex of Vietnam's partnership hierarchy. Beyond these poles, Japan, India, Russia, the European Union, and Australia furnish additional vectors of engagement in defence modernisation, infrastructure, digital economy, and supply-chain restructuring. Throughout, ASEAN remains the principal stage on which Vietnam rehearses and projects its diplomatic doctrine; defending ASEAN centrality and the peaceful settlement of disputes aligns with Hanoi's preference for inclusive, non-exclusionary architectures grounded in the ASEAN Charter.⁸

Despite a burgeoning policy literature, several gaps remain. First, much analysis treats bamboo diplomacy as a slogan rather than a set of operational logics traceable across discrete episodes. This article instead unpacks *how* the idiom is operationalised in three arenas: (1) Vietnam–China maritime interactions; (2) Vietnam–United States security and economic engagement; and (3) Vietnam's agenda-setting and coalition-building within ASEAN-led mechanisms. Secondly, existing accounts under-theorise the mechanisms by which a normative idiom (resilience, flexibility, and principles) translates into credible commitments recognised by external actors. Drawing on soft-balancing theory and the literature on reputational signalling, the article identifies mechanisms of *issue-linkage*, *sequenced concessions*, and *coalitional signalling*

⁸ The ASEAN Charter (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2008), esp. Chapter VII, [2.-February-2015-The-ASEAN-Charter-18th-Reprint.pdf](https://asean.org/2.-February-2015-The-ASEAN-Charter-18th-Reprint.pdf)

that jointly raise the costs of coercion without formal alliance commitments.^{9¹⁰} Thirdly, the literature often lists vulnerabilities (trade dependence on China, capability gaps) without evaluating the *thresholds* at which flexibility becomes drift or at which diversification becomes overstretched. This study introduces threshold criteria—economic concentration ratios, force-modernisation timelines, and institutional bandwidth—that help discriminate tactical adaptation from strategic incoherence.

The article proceeds in four steps. The Results section first reconstructs the origins and conceptualisation of bamboo diplomacy, linking cultural symbolism to post-*Đổi Mới* statecraft and identifying the 2021 articulation as a consolidation rather than an invention *ex nihilo*. It then details the strategic structure—operationalised as a triad of flexibility, firmness, and networked multilateralism—before mapping applications across the three arenas named above. The Discussion section embeds these findings within IR debates on hedging, soft balancing, and middle-power diplomacy, arguing that bamboo diplomacy refines soft balancing by emphasising sequential calibration and coalitional signalling over mere diversification. It also addresses limits and vulnerabilities, including systemic shocks (trade weaponisation, technology restrictions) and crisis contingencies (grey-zone coercion at sea) that could stress-test the idiom. The Conclusion distills the article’s contributions for theory (local idioms as usable IR concepts) and practice (policy design for preserving strategic autonomy), and sketches avenues for future research,

⁹ Paul T.V, Kai He, and Wivel, “Soft Balancing in the Regions”

¹⁰ Maria Larionova, “Conceptualising Soft Balancing Beyond the Cold War,” *CEJISS* 14, no. 3 (2020): 36–58. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353735309_Conceptualizing_Soft_Balancing_Beyond_Cold_War_What's_Changed_What_Remains_the_Same

including the conditions under which bamboo diplomacy might drift towards de facto alignment or retreat into defensive minimalism.

Two clarifications are in order. First, while this article uses the language of “middle power” for heuristic clarity, it recognises ongoing debates about Vietnam’s material capabilities and status hierarchies in Asia. The analysis therefore treats *middle powerness* as a relational position—constructed through behaviour and recognition—rather than a fixed category. Secondly, “bamboo diplomacy” is not presented as a panacea. Its efficacy is contingent on external responsiveness (how partners read and reward signals), domestic cohesion (policy continuity across leadership cycles), and institutional capacity (to implement diversified partnerships without diffusion of effort). These contingencies, far from weakening the concept, specify the conditions under which it meaningfully constrains and enables policy.

In sum, by reading *bamboo diplomacy* as a locally articulated, operational doctrine—rather than a post hoc label—this article shows how Vietnam has carved strategic space amid great-power rivalry without binding alliances. The account contributes to IR by integrating indigenous idioms into generalisable mechanisms (sequenced flexibility, principled firmness, and networked multilateralism), and to policy by clarifying thresholds that distinguish adaptation from drift. If bamboo bends without breaking, its diplomatic analogue succeeds when flexibility is rule-governed, not reactive, and when deep roots—principles and institutions—anchor movement.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design combining document analysis with focused case-based inference and limited triangulation using publicly available datasets. The approach is appropriate to the article’s objectives: to reconstruct the conceptual content of Vietnam’s *bamboo diplomacy*, to trace how it is operationalised across issue areas, and to assess

its limits and prospects within contemporary International Relations debates. The analysis proceeds in four steps: (1) source collection and corpus construction; (2) coding and within-case process tracing; (3) cross-case pattern identification; and (4) triangulation and robustness checks.

The primary corpus comprises authoritative Vietnamese party-state documents and official statements: the General Secretary's address at the National Foreign Relations Conference (14 December 2021); Party Congress reports and Central Committee resolutions relevant to foreign and defence policy; white papers and defence posture documents; and MOFA/MOD communiqués and joint statements with key partners.¹¹¹²¹³ These materials were complemented by ASEAN legal-institutional texts (notably the *ASEAN Charter* and chairmanship statements) and selected partner documents (e.g., the *2023 Joint Leaders' Statement elevating U.S.–Vietnam relations*).¹⁴

¹⁵To avoid overreliance on any single state narrative, the corpus included independent secondary analyses published by peer-reviewed journals and research institutes, together with curated regional media that reproduce or translate primary statements.¹⁶¹⁷¹⁸

¹¹ Nguyễn Phú Trọng, “*Full Speech by Party Leader Nguyen Phu Trong at National Foreign Relations Conference*,” (31st December, 2021).

¹² Communist Party of Viet Nam, *Documents of the 13th National Congress* (Hà Nội: National Political Publishing House, 2021).

¹³ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper* (Hà Nội: Government of Viet Nam, 2019).

¹⁴ ASEAN Secretariat, *The ASEAN Charter* (2008).

¹⁵ Joint Leaders' Statement: Elevating United States–Vietnam Relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” *The White House*, (11 September 2023).

¹⁶ Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “Hedging as a Policy Without Pronouncement: A Tale of Three Defence White Papers,” 5-22.

¹⁷ Larionova, “Conceptualising Soft Balancing Beyond the Cold War.” (2025).

¹⁸ Paul, Kai He, and Wivel, “Soft Balancing in the Regions: Causes, Characteristics and Consequences.” (2025.) 3-15.

Results – Origins and Conceptualisation

Vietnam's *bamboo diplomacy* emerged at the intersection of long-standing party-state principles and the demands of a denser, more competitive regional order after *Đổi Mới*. Its intellectual lineage reaches back to the foreign policy tenets articulated by the Communist Party of Viet Nam (CPV)—independence, self-reliance, peace, friendship, cooperation and development—reiterated across Party Congress documents and defence white papers since the 1990s. What is distinctive in the current formulation is the elevation of a culturally resonant metaphor—bamboo—to synthesise these tenets into a single, portable doctrine of statecraft. The image communicates two ideas at once: suppleness in response to external pressure and rootedness in principles and institutions. General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng's keynote at the National Foreign Relations Conference on 14 December 2021 marks the decisive codification of this metaphor in the party's diplomatic lexicon.¹⁹

Cultural idiom, policy doctrine

As a cultural symbol, bamboo has long signified community resilience and interdependence in Vietnamese political thought and literature. The party-state's appropriation of this symbol for diplomacy performs an important translational task: it renders the abstract language of “flexibility” and “principles” legible to domestic audiences while signalling to external partners that adaptability will be rule-governed, not capricious. Trọng's 2021 address explicitly tied the metaphor to three attributes—resilience, flexibility, and humanity—each anchored in institutional

¹⁹ Nguyễn Phú Trọng, “Full Speech by Party Leader Nguyen Phu Trong at National Foreign Relations Conference,” (31st December 2021).

practice.²⁰ Subsequent theoretical elaborations by the Hồ Chí Minh National Academy of Politics (HCMA) framed *bamboo diplomacy* as the distilled essence of the Party’s foreign-relations theory in the renovation period, insisting that flexibility must be inseparable from firmness on core interests and from a commitment to inclusive, cooperative internationalism.²¹ Read together, these texts move the bamboo motif from poetic imagery to operational doctrine.

Continuity through consolidation, not invention *ex nihilo*

The doctrine’s novelty should not be overstated. In important respects, *bamboo diplomacy* consolidates elements already present in earlier authoritative statements. The *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper* codified the country’s “Four Nos” policy—no military alliances; no siding with one country against another; no foreign bases or use of Vietnamese territory against other states; and no use or threat of force—while leaving calibrated space for appropriate defence cooperation “in accordance with circumstances and specific conditions.”²² This formula pairs a clear floor of restraint with a ceiling of pragmatic engagement, anticipating the later emphasis on flexibility bound by principles. Likewise, Party Congress documents preceding 2021 consistently foregrounded independence and multilateralism as the organising principles of external engagement.²³ The 2021 speech thus reads as a consolidation and reframing—aligning existing tenets under a unifying, indigenous idiom rather than announcing a wholesale doctrinal shift.

²⁰ Nguyễn Phú Trọng, “Full Speech by Party Leader Nguyen Phu Trong at National Foreign Relations Conference,” (31st December 2021).

²¹ HCMA, “Vietnamese ‘Bamboo Diplomacy’ Philosophy,” (2025).

²² Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper*, esp. sections on the “Four Nos” and the clause on cooperation “in accordance with circumstances and specific conditions.”

²³ Communist Party of Viet Nam, *Documents of the 13th National Congress*.

From metaphor to mechanisms

The conceptual move from metaphor to doctrine depends on specifying mechanisms that translate resilience and flexibility into predictable patterns of policy. Three such mechanisms are salient in the sources.

First, sequenced flexibility. Vietnamese statements frequently exhibit *issue-linkage* across economic and security domains, deferring resolution of contentious questions (e.g., specific maritime incidents) while advancing cooperation in trade, investment, or connectivity. The sequencing is not accidental: official readouts and joint communiqués often record tangible economic steps alongside restatements of principled positions on sovereignty and peaceful dispute settlement.²⁴ Flexibility is thus expressed as calibrated timing and ordering of concessions or initiatives rather than as simultaneous, contradictory signalling.

Secondly, principled firmness. Across party and government texts, certain red lines recur with remarkable consistency: independence and self-reliance; non-use or threat of force; peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law; and the *Four Nos*.²⁵ The repetition of these clauses, including in contexts of diplomatic upgrades with major powers, functions as reputational signalling: it increases the expected political cost of deviating from publicly affirmed constraints, thereby making flexibility credible rather than merely tactical.

Thirdly, networked multilateralism. The ASEAN Charter's commitment to peaceful dispute settlement and inclusive regionalism aligns closely with Hanoi's preferred diplomatic

²⁴ "Joint Leaders' Statement: Elevating United States–Vietnam Relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," *The White House*, (11 September 2023).

²⁵ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper*.

theatre.²⁶ Vietnam's chairmanship practices and agenda-setting within ASEAN-led mechanisms (e.g., emphasis on legal principles in the South China Sea; support for economic connectivity and supply-chain resilience) illustrate how *bamboo diplomacy* leverages multilateral venues to diffuse bilateral pressure and to multiply partners without exclusive alignment. In this reading, multilateralism is not an adornment but a *force multiplier* that turns diversified relationships into coalitional signals.

Conceptual boundaries: hedging, soft balancing, and “bamboo”

Scholarly labels such as *hedging* or *soft balancing* capture parts of this practice but risk eliding indigenous criteria that guide when to bend and when to stand firm. Hedging often denotes simultaneous, offsetting policies; *bamboo diplomacy* places greater emphasis on the *order* of moves and on their public justification in party-state discourse.²⁷ Soft balancing literature, for its part, helps illuminate how Vietnam raises the costs of coercion through partnerships, capacity-building, and institutional strategies short of alliance formation.²⁸ Yet the indigenous idiom adds a normative spine—principled flexibility—that clarifies thresholds between adaptation and drift. In this sense, *bamboo diplomacy* can be read as a local specification of soft balancing, disciplined by declared constraints (the *Four Nos*) and operationalised through sequenced, coalitional signalling.

Early applications that shaped conceptual uptake

²⁶ ASEAN Secretariat, *The ASEAN Charter* (2008).

²⁷ Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “Hedging as a Policy Without Pronouncement: A Tale of Three Defence White Papers,” 5-22.

²⁸ Paul, Kai He, and Wivel, “Soft Balancing in the Regions”; Larionova, “Conceptualising Soft Balancing Beyond the Cold War.”

Two families of policy episodes illustrate how the concept travelled from speech to practice and back into official discourse.

Strategic upgrades and diversification. The elevation of United States–Vietnam relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in September 2023 exemplifies calibrated diversification without exclusive alignment. The joint statement paired ambitious economic and technological cooperation with reaffirmations of fundamental principles—respect for each other’s political systems, independence, and peaceful dispute settlement—thus embedding flexibility within declared constraints. Parallel advances with other major partners (Russia, China, Japan, India, the European Union, Australia) reaffirm the doctrine’s networked character: diversification is pursued as *plural* rather than binary alignment.²⁹

ASEAN-centred norm entrepreneurship. Vietnam’s consistent support for ASEAN centrality—operationalised through adherence to the Charter, participation in code-of-conduct processes, and repeated invocations of international law—demonstrates how networked multilateralism serves both as shield and platform.³⁰ Here, *bamboo diplomacy* is not merely reactive to great-power rivalry; it is constitutive of regional order-building efforts that reward restraint and embed legal/procedural norms.

In sum, the origins and conceptual architecture of *bamboo diplomacy* reveal a doctrine that is simultaneously indigenous and generalisable: indigenous in its cultural idiom and party-state narrative; generalisable in its mechanisms of sequenced flexibility, principled firmness, and networked multilateralism. Properly understood, the doctrine sets decision rules—when to bend,

²⁹ See relevant joint communiqués with Japan, India, the European Union and Australia.

³⁰ *The ASEAN Charter*; ASEAN chair statements and meeting records.

when to hold, and how to multiply partners—that can be traced across issue areas and time, providing a falsifiable account of Vietnamese statecraft rather than a slogan retrofitted to outcomes.

Results — Strategic Structure

Vietnam's doctrine of *bamboo diplomacy* can be analytically reconstructed as a triad of **flexibility, firmness, and networked multilateralism**. These are not free-floating virtues: they are decision rules that structure sequencing, signalling and coalition-building across issue areas.

Flexibility denotes calibrated adaptation to shifting constraints without surrendering strategic aims. In authoritative texts, flexibility appears as *linh hoạt* and is coupled to pragmatism in timing and issue-linkage—deferring resolution of high-salience disputes while advancing tangible cooperation in economics, connectivity or technology. Trọng's 2021 address explicitly justified adaptive methods as necessary to “new conditions,” while insisting that adaptation be tethered to principle.³¹ Flexibility is therefore procedural (the order and tempo of moves) rather than ideological (a change of ends).

Firmness is the doctrinal anchor. Party-state documents reiterate the invariants of independence and self-reliance, the renunciation of force, peaceful settlement consistent with international law, and the *Four Nos* no military alliances; no siding with one country against another; no foreign bases or use of Vietnamese territory against other states; and no use or threat of force.³²³³ The 2019 *National Defence White Paper* also preserves a narrow corridor for defence

³¹ Nguyễn Phú Trọng, “Full Speech by Party Leader Nguyen Phu Trong at National Foreign Relations Conference,” (31st December, 2021).

³² Communist Party of Viet Nam, *Documents of the 13th National Congress* (2021).

³³ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper*, (2019).

cooperation “in accordance with circumstances and specific conditions,” signalling that firmness constrains but does not freeze policy.³⁴ Public repetition of these constraints in joint statements with major partners converts firmness into a reputational commitment that raises the cost of deviation.³⁵

Networked multilateralism provides the operational theatre. The ASEAN Charter’s commitment to peaceful dispute settlement and inclusive regionalism aligns with Hanoi’s preference for architectures that dilute bilateral pressure and translate legal-procedural norms into expectations of behaviour.³⁶ In practice, Vietnam leverages ASEAN-led forums and overlapping strategic partnerships (with the United States, China, Russia, Japan, India, the EU, Australia and others) to create coalitional signals of restraint and resolve short of alliance formation.

The triad is **sequential**. Flexibility opens space; firmness defines the boundaries of acceptable compromise; networked multilateralism multiplies the effects of calibrated moves by anchoring them in institutions and partnerships. As a result, *bamboo diplomacy* refines generic hedging by specifying **when** to bend (procedural adaptation), **where** to hold (substantive red lines), and **how** to scale effects (coalitional and institutional platforms).

Results – Applications

1) Vietnam–China: Managing Maritime Frictions, Advancing Economic Ties

³⁴ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper*, esp. sections on the “Four Nos” and cooperation “in accordance with circumstances and specific conditions.” (2019).

³⁵ For example, principles are reiterated in high-level joint statements; see “Joint Leaders’ Statement...,” *The White House*, 11 September 2023.

³⁶ ASEAN Secretariat, *The ASEAN Charter* (2008).

In the Sino-Vietnamese dyad, *bamboo diplomacy* manifests as compartmentalisation. Maritime disputes in the South China Sea are bracketed by repeated affirmations of peaceful settlement, UNCLOS principles and the importance of maintaining stability, while economic engagement proceeds through trade, investment and connectivity initiatives. Official readouts and joint communiqués typically pair restated sovereignty positions with announcements of practical cooperation, reflecting sequenced flexibility: de-escalatory rhetoric and confidence-building at sea are matched by forward movement in non-contentious domains.³⁷ Firmness appears in the consistent public restatement of maritime red lines and the *Four Nos*, while networked multilateralism is expressed through Vietnam’s advocacy for an effective and substantive Code of Conduct under ASEAN auspices—an institutional device to diffuse bilateral pressure.³⁸

2) Vietnam–United States: Diversification without Alignment

The September 2023 elevation of relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership illustrates calibrated diversification. The joint leaders’ statement and accompanying fact sheet foreground deepening cooperation in technology, supply chains, education, health and clean energy, alongside language on respect for each other’s political systems and for independence and sovereignty.³⁹ This pairing exemplifies the triad: flexibility (broadening cooperation into new, future-oriented sectors), firmness (publicly affirmed principles and constraints), and networked multilateralism (the partnership nested within wider Indo-Pacific and ASEAN-centred cooperation rather than an exclusive bloc commitment). Vietnam’s defence posture—guided by the *Four Nos*

³⁷ See authoritative readouts and joint communiqués compiled in the author’s document log; for background on incident management and timelines, consult Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), “Timeline of South China Sea Incidents,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed October 2025.

³⁸ *The ASEAN Charter*; ASEAN-led Code of Conduct processes and chair statements.

³⁹ “Joint Leaders’ Statement: Elevating United States–Vietnam Relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” and “Fact Sheet: United States–Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” both September 2023.

yet permitting selective capacity-building and defence industry ties—further demonstrates how diversification is bounded by doctrinal constraints.⁴⁰

3) ASEAN and Wider Coalitions: Institutional Force Multipliers

ASEAN remains the principal multiplier of Vietnam’s diplomatic signals. By anchoring dispute-management in the Charter, chair statements and ministerial processes, Hanoi converts preferences (peaceful settlement, non-use of force, open regionalism) into shared procedural expectations.⁴¹ Networked multilateralism is visible in Vietnam’s concurrent cultivation of comprehensive and strategic partnerships with regional powers, such as Japan, India and Australia—relationships that reinforce economic resilience and deterrence by denial through capacity-building and connectivity rather than alliances.⁴² This layered coalition strategy operationalises soft balancing: it raises the costs of coercion by broadening external stakeholders in regional stability, while preserving autonomy and avoiding exclusive alignment.⁴³⁴⁴

4) Russia: Legacy Ties, Energy Pillar, and Sanctions Frictions

With Russia, *bamboo diplomacy* foregrounds historical continuity and sectoral depth—especially in energy and defence—while navigating post-2022 sanctions frictions. The relationship, upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership since 2012, has been underpinned by long-standing oil and gas ventures (e.g., Vietsovpetro, Rusvietpetro) and defence industrial

⁴⁰ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper*, (2019).

⁴¹ *The ASEAN Charter* (2008); ASEAN chair statements and ministerial records.

⁴² See relevant joint communiqués with Japan, India, the European Union and Australia.

⁴³ Paul, Kai He, and Wivel, “Soft Balancing in the Regions”; Larionova, “Conceptualising Soft Balancing Beyond the Cold War.”

⁴⁴ Maria Larionova, “Conceptualising Soft Balancing Beyond the Cold War,” (2020), 36–58.

links.⁴⁵ Recent high-level exchanges in 2024–2025 reaffirmed the strategic frame and produced new sectoral instruments: during Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin’s visit to Hà Nội (January 2025), the sides signed a nuclear cooperation agreement involving Rosatom and EVN, alongside commitments on hydrocarbons (LNG and crude) and digital economy cooperation; Moscow also floated support for Vietnam as a BRICS “partner country.”⁴⁶ A May 2025 Joint Statement then charted “major orientations” for the partnership’s next phase.⁴⁷

Applied to the triad, flexibility is visible in Hanoi’s *sequenced* pursuit of energy security (nuclear restart options, continued offshore cooperation) even as financial channels require workaround solutions under sanctions. Firmness appears in the consistent public reiteration of Vietnam’s principles—*independence, peaceful settlement of disputes, and the Four Nos*—which bound any defence-related engagement. Networked multilateralism helps cushion bilateral pressure: Vietnam hedges reputational risk by embedding cooperation within broader diversification (Japan, India, EU, U.S.) and by using ASEAN-centred venues to keep regional order-building distinct from bloc politics. The cumulative effect is soft balancing without alignment: legacy depth with Russia is preserved, but calibrated to avoid foreclosing other partnerships.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Vietnam News, “Energy Cooperation – a Pillar of Việt Nam-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: Official,” (8 May 2025).

⁴⁶ Reuters, “Vietnam Signs Nuclear Cooperation Deal with Russia’s Rosatom,” (14 January 2025).; Reuters, “Russia Offers to Provide LNG, Crude Oil to Vietnam,” (15 January 2025).; Associated Press, “Russia Says It Will Help Vietnam Become a ‘Partner Country’ in the BRICS Bloc,” (15 January 2025).

⁴⁷ VGP News (Government Portal), “Joint Statement on Major Orientations for Viet Nam-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” (12 May 2025). [Joint Statement on major orientations for Viet Nam-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)

⁴⁸ Sergey Lavrov, “Russia and Vietnam: Strengthening a Time-Tested Friendship,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, (7 May 2025).

5) European Union: Legal-Institutional Anchors and Green Transition

With the European Union, *bamboo diplomacy* leverages legal-institutional frameworks as economic and normative anchors. The EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) entered into force on 1 August 2020, liberalising most tariff lines and locking in standards on services, procurement and sustainable development; the parallel Investment Protection Agreement (EVIPA) awaits ratification by all EU member states, with the number of ratifications steadily rising.⁴⁹ In parallel, Hanoi has positioned the EU as a key partner in its Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP): Team Europe announced significant new financing in October 2025 (including a €430 million package for the Bác Ái pumped-hydro project), complementing broader EU allocations for 2021–2027 and multibillion-euro European contributions to Vietnam’s energy transition.⁵⁰

In triadic terms, flexibility takes the form of supply-chain and standards diversification via the EVFTA and green-industry cooperation under the JETP; firmness is reflected in Vietnam’s insistence on autonomy over development sequencing while committing to UNFCCC/Paris-aligned pathways; networked multilateralism appears in the way EU cooperation is embedded in ASEAN connectivity agendas and global climate regimes. The net result is a rules-based hedge that reduces over-dependence on any single market, signals normative convergence where interests

⁴⁹ European Commission, “EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement,” accessed October 2025, <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/eu-vietnam-free-trade-agreement>; European Commission, “EU–Vietnam Agreements,” accessed October 2025, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/viet-nam_en; see also European Commission, “EU–Viet Nam Agreements: Ratification Status of EVIPA,” accessed October 2025.

⁵⁰ European Commission, “EU Reinforces Support for Vietnam’s Just Energy Transition with €430 Million Package,” Global Gateway Forum News, (9 October 2025).; Vietnam Electricity Authority (EAV), “EU Funds Vietnam’s Just Energy Transition Project,” (15 October 2025).; Carnegie Endowment, “The Just Energy Transition Partnership at a Crossroads,” October 2025 (Vietnam’s JETP announced December 2022).

align (trade facilitation, green transition), and reinforces Vietnam's preference for inclusive architectures over exclusive blocs.⁵¹

Discussion

This article has argued that Vietnam's *bamboo diplomacy* is best understood as a rule-governed doctrine that sequences flexibility, firmness and networked multilateralism to expand room for manoeuvre without formal alliances. In theoretical terms, the argument clarifies how an indigenous diplomatic idiom can do explanatory work comparable to established IR constructs, while refining them in ways that are sensitive to local decision rules and reputational constraints.

A first contribution lies in differentiating *bamboo diplomacy* from generic hedging. Hedging is often defined by simultaneous pursuit of partly offsetting policies that insure against adverse shifts in the balance of power. In practice, such definitions risk portraying behaviour as an undifferentiated portfolio whose internal ordering is epiphenomenal.⁵² By contrast, *bamboo diplomacy* stresses sequencing and conditionality: adaptation is procedural—timing, issue-linkage, and calibrated reciprocity—while strategic ends remain constant. Firmness provides a set of publicly declared constraints—*independence, peaceful settlement in accordance with international law, and the Four Nos*—that make flexibility credible.⁵³ Thus, what appears under a hedging lens as policy ambivalence is, under the bamboo frame, a governed alternation between de-escalation

⁵¹ European Commission, “EU–Viet Nam: Countries and Regions – Viet Nam,” accessed October 2025; ASEAN connectivity documents and Chair statements.

⁵² Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “Hedging as a Policy Without Pronouncement: A Tale of Three Defence White Papers,” in *Joint Research Series No. 22* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2025), 1–29.

⁵³ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper*; Communist Party of Viet Nam, *Documents of the 13th National Congress*.

and position-holding, visible in the pairing of sovereignty language with practical cooperation across major joint statements and readouts.

A second contribution concerns soft balancing. The literature shows how non-allied coalitions, institutional strategies and capacity-building can raise the costs of coercion short of counter-alliances. *Bamboo diplomacy* specifies the micro-mechanisms by which this occurs in Vietnam's case. Networked multilateralism is not merely a preference for "talk shops"; it is an operational method that transforms diversified partnerships into coalitional signals embedded in ASEAN-centred and issue-specific architectures. The ASEAN Charter's procedures, code-of-conduct processes and chair statements help convert Vietnam's principled positions into shared expectations that socialise partners and constrain escalation, even when legal outcomes remain contested. In this reading, Vietnam's upgrades with both the United States and China, and sectoral deepening with Japan, India, the EU, Australia and Russia are not mutually cancelling tracks; they are components of a deliberately *plural* network that multiplies external stakeholders in regional stability while preserving decision autonomy.⁵⁴

A third contribution is to the performativity of foreign-policy language. Naming a doctrine publicly—and repeating it in authoritative fora—generates reputational stakes at home and abroad.⁵⁵ The *bamboo* label tells counterparts that adaptation will be bounded by stated principles and that flexibility is not a veil for opportunism; domestically, it links pragmatic manoeuvre to a culturally resonant ideal of resilience and rootedness, thereby shoring up legitimacy for policy

⁵⁴ On Vietnam's partnership network and diversification, see official communiqués with the United States, Japan, India, the EU, Australia and Russia.

⁵⁵ Nguyễn Phú Trọng, "Full Speech by Party Leader Nguyen Phu Trong at National Foreign Relations Conference,"; HCMA, "Vietnamese 'Bamboo Diplomacy' Philosophy: The Essence of the Party's Theory on Foreign Relations in the Renovation Period."

calibration. Performativity here is not rhetorical surplus: it is part of the signalling technology that underwrites credibility.

These contributions are matched by scope conditions. The doctrine's effectiveness depends, first, on an external environment where multiple partners are willing and able to reciprocate diversification without demanding exclusive alignment. Should great-power rivalry harden into bloc discipline that penalises equidistance—through secondary sanctions, technology denial, or coercive economic measures—the functional space for sequenced flexibility would shrink. Trade concentration ratios and technology-access dependencies offer early warning of such tightening constraints: rising concentration in a single market or chokepoint exposure in critical inputs would reduce Vietnam's leverage and increase the costs of principled firmness.⁵⁶ Secondly, credible restraint by all parties at sea is necessary for process-based de-escalation to work. If grey-zone tactics were to escalate into sustained kinetic incidents, the domestic premium on firmness could tempt policy into rigidity or precipitate ad hoc alignments that erode the *Four Nos*. Incident timelines and patterns of unsafe encounters should therefore be treated as indicators of mounting stress on the doctrine.⁵⁷ Thirdly, institutional bandwidth matters. Diversification without coordination risks overextension: too many overlapping frameworks can dilute follow-through. Benchmarks such as the number of active working groups with measurable outputs, or alignment between partnership roadmaps and budgeted implementation capacity, can help distinguish expansion from diffusion.

⁵⁶ United Nations, “UN Comtrade Database,” accessed October 2025, <https://comtradeplus.un.org/>.

⁵⁷ AMTI, “Timeline of South China Sea Incident.”

A fourth issue concerns defence cooperation. The *Four Nos* remain the anchor of Vietnam's defence posture, yet the *2019 White Paper* leaves carefully defined space for "cooperation in accordance with circumstances and specific conditions."⁵⁸ This corridor enables selective capacity-building and co-production initiatives while maintaining non-alliance status. The balance is delicate: cooperation that materially improves denial and resilience strengthens soft-balancing effects; cooperation that is read externally as tacit alignment could trigger counter-pressure that narrow flexibility. Public reiteration of constraints in joint statements, transparency about the non-offensive character of capabilities, and multilateral rather than bilateral framing of activities help preserve the intended signal.

The doctrine's domestic foundations are equally important. Continuity in party-state consensus and the bureaucratic capacity to coordinate across economic, diplomatic and defence entities are prerequisites for sequenced flexibility to function. Trọng's 2021 codification and subsequent elaborations by party schools provide a stable narrative frame that links tactical adaptation to principled ends.⁵⁹ Yet the doctrine is not self-executing. It requires disciplined prioritisation—choosing which concessions to sequence, which issues to compartmentalise, and which forums to elevate. Failures of prioritisation would show up as either *policy drift* (flexibility without anchors) or *defensive minimalism* (firmness without initiatives). The thresholds proposed in the Methodology section—trade concentration, force-modernisation timelines, and institutional bandwidth—offer a replicable way to diagnose such slippage.

⁵⁸ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper*.

⁵⁹ Nguyễn Phú Trọng, "Full Speech by Party Leader Nguyen Phu Trong at National Foreign Relations Conference,"; "Vietnamese 'Bamboo Diplomacy' Philosophy: The Essence of the Party's Theory on Foreign Relations in the Renovation Period".

How generalisable is *bamboo diplomacy* beyond Vietnam? The core mechanisms—sequenced flexibility, principled firmness, and networked multilateralism—are not unique to a single historical trajectory and may travel to other middle powers facing asymmetric pressure, such as Indonesia or Malaysia. What is locally specific is the cultural idiom and the precise configuration of red lines and institutional anchors. Comparative vignettes suggest that where states possess (a) a publicly declared set of constraints that partners accept as credible; (b) access to inclusive regional architectures; and (c) domestic narratives that legitimise calibrated adaptation, a bamboo-like strategy can emerge without borrowing the metaphor. Conversely, where any of these pillars is absent—no credible constraints, exclusionary regional orders, or polarised domestic politics—the model’s performance is likely to degrade.

Finally, the doctrine’s long-term viability will be tested by structural transitions in trade, technology and energy systems. The EU–Vietnam EVFTA and energy-transition instruments (e.g., the JETP) illustrate how standards-based integration can reduce single-market exposure and ease decarbonisation bottlenecks, thereby enlarging the space for autonomous decision-making.⁶⁰ Conversely, sanctions regimes and competing technology spheres could fragment supply chains and compress options, especially if workarounds incur rising financial or reputational costs. In such contexts, the value of networked multilateralism increases: embedding cooperation in legal-institutional frameworks—ASEAN procedures, bilateral agreements with clear dispute-settlement clauses, and plurilateral partnerships—helps lock in gains and distribute risk.

In sum, *bamboo diplomacy* offers IR theory a locally grounded specification of soft balancing and a corrective to undisciplined accounts of hedging. For policymakers, it provides

⁶⁰ European Commission, “EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement”; European Commission, “EU Reinforces Support for Vietnam’s Just Energy Transition with €430 Million Package,” (9th October 2025).

decision rules—when to bend, where to hold, how to multiply effects—that can be operationalised and monitored with transparent indicators. The doctrine will remain compelling so long as flexibility is sequenced rather than scattershot, firmness is publicly reaffirmed and credible, and multilateral architectures remain inclusive enough to convert diversified ties into coalitional restraint.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Vietnam’s *bamboo diplomacy* is neither a slogan nor a mere rebranding of generic hedging, but a rule-governed doctrine that sequences flexibility, firmness, and networked multilateralism to protect sovereignty, widen economic and technological options, and preserve strategic autonomy amid great-power rivalry. Reconstructed from authoritative party-state texts and traced across key arenas—relations with China and the United States, ASEAN-centred order-building, and partnerships with Russia and the European Union—the doctrine operates through identifiable mechanisms: sequenced concessions and initiatives across linked issue areas; the public reiteration of principled constraints (independence, peaceful settlement, the *Four Nos*) that bound adaptation;⁶¹ and the conversion of diversified ties into coalitional signals embedded in inclusive institutions.

Three theoretical payoffs follow. First, the analysis specifies *how* a locally articulated idiom can do explanatory work beyond metaphor. The bamboo frame clarifies decision rules—when to bend, where to hold, and how to multiply effects—that are often obscured when behaviour is labelled simply as hedging. Secondly, it refines soft-balancing accounts by highlighting

⁶¹ Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper*; “Four No’s principle of national defense policy,” *VGP News (Government Portal)*, (26 January 2020).; “Prime Minister reassures Viet Nam’s four nos defense policy,” *VGP News*, (6 August 2023).

procedural calibration: partnerships and institutional strategies matter not only in aggregate but in their ordering, tempo and public justification, which together raise the expected costs of coercion without alliance formation. Thirdly, it shows the performativity of doctrine: by naming and repeating constraints and intentions, Vietnam increases the credibility of restraint at home and abroad, reducing the risk that flexibility is misread as opportunism.

The policy implications are equally concrete. For Vietnamese decision-makers, the doctrine's vitality rests on disciplined *sequencing*. Flexibility should continue to open space through practical cooperation—trade, supply-chain resilience, technology, energy transition—while *firmness* is publicly reaffirmed on core issues, especially maritime sovereignty and non-alignment. *Networked multilateralism* remains the force multiplier: anchoring initiatives in ASEAN processes, legally framed bilateral agreements, and plurilateral compacts spreads risk, locks in gains, and signals inclusive rather than exclusive order-building. This requires bureaucratic prioritisation to avoid diffusion: partnership roadmaps should be matched with budgeted implementation capacity and monitored outputs, so that diversification does not degrade into a proliferation of under-resourced frameworks.

Stress points are visible. Externally, sharper bloc discipline—via secondary sanctions, technology controls, or coercive economic measures—could compress the space for calibrated manoeuvre. Internally, overextension across too many initiatives risks thinning institutional bandwidth; conversely, crisis-driven rigidity could erode the very adaptability that gives bamboo its resilience. The thresholds proposed in this study—trade concentration ratios, force-modernisation timelines and supplier diversity, and measurable partnership outputs—offer replicable diagnostics for distinguishing principled flexibility from policy drift or defensive

minimalism. Regularly auditing these indicators would help sustain coherence as the environment changes.

For partners engaging Vietnam, the doctrine provides a practical guide. Offers that respect declared constraints and are framed in open, non-exclusive formats are more likely to be taken up and sustained. Economic and technological cooperation that reduces single-market exposure, expands human-capital formation, and builds dual-use resilience will reinforce the benign reading of diversification. Defence collaboration that is transparently non-allied, capacity-building oriented, and embedded in multilateral contexts will strengthen deterrence by denial without triggering counter-pressures that narrow Hanoi's options. In short, the most durable partnerships with Vietnam are those that *add* room for manoeuvre rather than trade it away.

More broadly, *bamboo diplomacy* travels as an analytic template for other middle powers facing asymmetric pressures. While the cultural idiom is distinctively Vietnamese, the doctrine's operational core—sequenced flexibility, principled firmness, networked multilateralism—offers a generalisable approach for states seeking to avoid both bandwagoning and brittle balancing. The key is not to copy the metaphor but to articulate credible constraints, cultivate inclusive institutional stages, and maintain domestic narratives that are legitimate calibrated adaptation.

Future research should deepen the micro-foundations of sequencing and signalling. Comparative studies could examine whether similar decision rules operate in Indonesia or Malaysia, and under what domestic or external conditions they succeed or fail. Event-coded datasets that align documentary signals with subsequent behaviour—maritime incidents, investment flows, technology cooperation, defence activities—would allow stronger causal inference about the effects of bamboo-style signalling on partner responses and crisis dynamics. Finally, the interaction between green-transition finance, supply-chain rewiring and strategic

autonomy deserves sustained attention: as decarbonisation and de-risking reshape trade and technology regimes, they will either widen or compress the corridor in which bamboo diplomacy can work.

The doctrine's promise lies in its disciplined pragmatism. Like its namesake, it is resilient not because it is soft, but because it bends according to rule and is anchored by deep roots. So long as flexibility remains sequenced rather than scattershot, firmness is credibly and repeatedly affirmed, and multilateral architectures stay open enough to convert diversified ties into coalitional restraint, Vietnam's *bamboo diplomacy* will continue to supply both an analytic lens for scholars and a usable guide for practitioners navigating a multipolar world.